Intimate Dependence and its Risks in Neoliberal Japan

Allison Alexy
The University of Virginia

ABSTRACT
This paper examines how contemporary Japanese women are negotiating neoliberal standards for independence in relation to cultural norms and personal desires that encourage dependence in romantic relationships. In recent decades, neoliberal standards of maturity have become increasingly visible in Japan, and many marital counselors offer advice suggesting that independent, atomized selves are a key to happiness. Yet many women express ambivalence at this formula and instead find romantic possibility in dependent relationships. I examine how women are contesting these opposing standards by focusing on advice surrounding naming practices between spouses. [Keywords: Japan, divorce, intimacy, neoliberalism, dependence]

Introduction
100 Reasons for Later-Life Divorce, a marital advice book published in Tokyo in 2006, offers more than just a list of the most common reasons for divorce among people over 60 years of age. After enumerating the “top 10” reasons for divorce given in a television program on the topic, the authors ask the reader to identify spouses’ mistakes in a narrative scenario. Following popular understandings of gendered responsibility, this task mostly consists of figuring out what the husband is doing wrong. In a section including a script of a middle-aged husband’s return from work
one evening, the text recommends keeping an eye out for the “reasons for divorce” (rikon riyū) and then provides a quiz about what isn’t working in this marriage. In this opening to a longer scenario, the husband manages to do three things that are presented as both entirely typical for a man of his age, and as dangerous risks for his marriage. First, this husband doesn’t return his wife’s greetings (aisatsu) when she welcomes him home. Second, he pulls off his clothes to lounge around in his underwear. And finally, when asking for a cold beer, he calls her “mother” (TBS bangumi seisaku sutaffu [TBS Broadcast Staff] 2006:72). This guidebook is one of many contemporary sources that suggest spouses are creating tectonic risks in marriages when they call each other “mother” and “father.” Yet this has long been a very common practice in Japanese families. I argue that, in popular representations, these common denotational practices are now seen as dangerous because they enable a dependence that conflicts with burgeoning neoliberal ideals of independent autonomy.

The Japanese divorce rate’s rise to over 30 percent coincided with public policies and private rhetorics that increasingly privilege neoliberal ethics of private ownership, individual responsibility, self-reliance, and reduced dependence on social structures like families or the nation-state. Such recent shifts have been particularly visible in Japan because through the 1980s state policies continued to construct families, rather than individuals, as the smallest social unit. For instance, during that time, all family members’ pensions were released to the family as a unit, which often meant that a woman’s pension was paid in her husband’s name (Rosenberger 1991). Conversely, legal changes in 2007 made it possible for divorced wives to claim part of their husbands’ future pension payments, constructing housewives as independent wage-earners entitled to cash out the benefits marriage accorded them (Alexy 2007). Although such newer laws are premised on neoliberal ideals of independent selves, simultaneous policies, such as those requiring all family members to share one last name, suggest the ongoing negotiation between ethics of individual responsibility and cultural ideals of interdependence.

For many people, the problems with a husband who calls his wife “mother” hinge directly on dependency. In their views, this practice contributes to marital problems because of the cluster of behaviors associated with it and the dependent intimacy it constructs. Like the fictional husband mentioned above, popular representations describe men who call their wives “mother” as old-fashioned, selfish, and satisfied with
their dependence on the very wives they take for granted. Counselors articulate two reasons why a husband calling his wife “mother” might be dangerous. First, when a husband calls his wife “mother” he is privileging her identity as a mother instead of as a wife. He suggests that their relationship is only about their children rather than spousal affection or conjugal love. In this understanding, the term “mother” is seen as evidence of a husband’s belief that his wife’s parental identity supercedes her marital identity, and that she is more a mother than a wife. Second, some counselors suggest that using “mother” encourages a husband to be childishly dependent on his wife, and prompts him to act like a child and treat her like his mother. With this tip, marital guidebooks and counselors are not only suggesting that there are many different ways to construct intimate relationships, but also that some of these might be bad for marriages and the people in them. Although Japanese relationships have long been described as fundamentally premised on dependence (amae), some marital advice now reflects a neoliberal wariness of dependent relationships (Allison 2000, Borovoy 2005, Doi 1978). The tensions surrounding denotational practices in marriages trace how contemporary Japanese women are negotiating neoliberal ethics of individualism, cultural norms of dependence, and personal desires for romance.

My ethnographic fieldwork reveals that women are ultimately ambiguous about how to include neoliberal ideals of independence in intimate relationships and continue to see dependency as a space of romantic possibility. The questions prompted by attention to neoliberalism neatly parallel the debates faced by people when they consider divorce: What should adult responsibility entail? When and how is independence or dependence good? For women struggling to save marriages or finalize divorces, the neoliberal ideal of an atomized self does not always provide satisfying solutions. Instead, the dependent intimacies embodied in the use of parental referents for spouses remain attractive, if complicated, for women who are considering the strength and success of their marriages. As the divorce rate continues to rise, and individuals contemplate the possibility that their marriage will end in divorce, they work to balance independence and dependence, selfish individuality and childish reliance, in efforts to create sustainable marital and family relationships. Although being independent (jiritsu) remains a key idea for many women who are divorced or considering it, their understandings and usages include a degree of contestation not typically recognized in counselors’ advice. For divorced and
divorcing women with whom I talked, dependence can be problematic, but is not always unattractive; independence offers some hope, but also the threat of loneliness. Considering divorce, and the moves people make to avoid it, I trace contemporary Japanese discourse about how best to be intimate in a neoliberal age.

This article’s theoretical engagement concerns how people negotiate neoliberal ethics in intimate relationships. Within neoliberal ethics—which I understand as a set of priorities that cross public policies and private understandings—people believe it is best to live as independently as possible, privileging individual responsibility, self-reliance, and minimal dependence on social structures like families or the nation-state. Such a push for independence conflicts with ideals of romantic intimacy, particularly characterizations of “companionate marriage” in which spouses are ideally best friends linked through affection, who share friendship networks and hobbies. These apparent contradictions between neoliberal ethics (which privilege independence) and companionate romantic ideals (which are premised on fundamental dependencies) offer space for ethnographic investigation extending from the current literatures on romance and neoliberalism in everyday lives (Hirch 2003, Hirch and Wardlow 2006, Rebhun 2002). The Japanese case is further instructive because of a cultural emphasis on maturity through dependence. In the early 1970s, Doi Takeo (1978) theorized that Japanese maturity is structured on and through relations of dependence. Rather than being automatically immature or problematic, as they might be described from Western perspectives, relationships built on dependence “permeate” Japanese society and enable people to rely on each other. The Japanese context, therefore, allows us an opportunity to add ethnographic flesh to academic discussions about how people negotiate romantic intimacy and neoliberalism—how people are imagining and experiencing responsibility, individuality, and dependence—in a context with a particular legacy of social appreciation for dependence.

This analysis is based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork about divorce experiences in Japan, from 2005 to 2006. In addition to spending time with married and divorced people, ethnographic interviews were conducted with married and divorced men and women, children whose parents had divorced, and a group I call “divorce professionals”—counselors, lawyers, and private detectives. I joined five support groups that included a range of participants and counseling styles. Building on time in
urban Tokyo, I did extensive fieldwork in a small industrial town in the far suburbs of Chiba and in Matsuyama, Shikoku. Because this fieldwork period overlapped with the national preparations for the pension law change mentioned above, which was commonly understood to induce more divorces, there was much popular media discourse about how to “save” or “help” marriages, and how to create “good” relationships, all of which figure into my analysis.

**Divorce in an Age of Neoliberalism**

The rising Japanese divorce rate is commonly contextualized in terms of recent demographic changes including a falling birth rate, the rising age at first marriage, and a rapidly aging population (Fuess 2004, Hirota 2004, Kelly and White 2006, Kumagai 1983, Ochiai 1997, Ono 2006, Retherford et al. 1996, Rosenberger 2001, White 2002). Coupled with changing occupational trends, a divorce rate above 30 percent suggests a significant shift away from postwar patterns of family lives, if not the norms that support them (Ochiai 1997; Raymo, Iwasawa, and Bumpass 2004; White 2002). In Japanese media, scholarship, and private conversations, the ultimate effect of these demographic changes remains unclear, though widely discussed. Similar discourses about the risks of divorce, both for families and the nation-state, coalesced around the change to the national pension law that went into effect in April 2007. This law enabled divorced spouses to petition for up to half of their former partner’s future pension payments; functionally, this law was commonly understood to give women in their 50s and 60s some slight financial incentive to divorce (Alexy 2007). Labeled “later-life divorce” (jukunen rikon), this threat most directly impacted aging baby boomers, prompting generalized reconsiderations of marital and family ideals; though advice books to “save” older marriages regularly addressed younger generations too (Muroi et al. 2006, Okano 2008, TBS 2006).

In public and private discussions about the characteristics of good marriages and families, what defines “good” remains resolutely under discussion. The moral panic prompted by the possibility of more later-life divorces after April 2007 reflected this changing definition of marital success. If a “good” marriage could be defined most simply as lacking divorce, many marriages that long seemed “good” were on newly shaky ground with the threat of divorce stemming from the pension law change.
Media representations surrounding the pension law change in April 2007 increasingly presented the styles of intimacy stereotypical of older spouses as newly problematic (Asahi terubi [Asahi Television] 2005, Itō 2006, Muroi et al. 2006). Broadly speaking, intimacy between older spouses has been regularly characterized by unstated or under-stated affection, highly gendered familial roles, separate hobbies and social spheres, and a relationship as partners rather than friends (Borovoy 2005, Ishii-Kuntz and Maryanski 2003). In debates about how best to construct marital relationships, these ways of being intimate are regularly contrasted with patterns associated with the ideals of “companionate marriage” (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006). Despite the insistent tone in some marital guidebooks that label particular behaviors unambiguously good or bad for marriages, people with whom I talked were less likely to be sure about what makes a good relationship and the best ways to be intimate. In group counseling sessions and private conversations, people were trying to negotiate possibilities for dependence and independence within romantic relationships.

These debates about the ideal ways to build intimacy coincide with a number of political policies and social norms that have reflected neoliberal ethics of private control and individual responsibility. My ethnographic fieldwork began on the day that then-Prime Minister Koizumi held a national election that he described as a referendum on his proposal to privatize the Japanese Postal Bank (Porges and Leong 2005). His plan was ultimately successful, and moved the capital held by the world’s richest bank from public to private control. Simultaneous to this explicit political move toward private ownership, rhetorics of personal responsibility on an individual level grew increasingly common. Because of the falling birth rate, aging population, and concurrent payroll tax losses, the government has been restructuring social services that have been available throughout the postwar, particularly those related to family and elder care. For instance, recent changes in national medical insurance programs reflect family members’ decreasing willingness to provide care for aging family members, and the government’s creation of supportive services to fill this gap (Campbell and Ikegami 2000). Contemporary social policies reflect a partial, and potentially contradictory, adoption of neoliberal ethics. On the one hand, social programs like the Angel Plan, which attempts to raise the birthrate by creating infrastructure in support of working parents, potentially reduce the burden on individuals through state support (Roberts 2002, White 2010). However, these same policies are less likely
to construct families as coherent social units and, instead, emphasize
the independence of family members (Borovoy 2010, Osawa 2005, Peng
2002). The discourse of neoliberalism can be used to many disparate, and
seemingly contradictory ends: feminists can use it to promote agency and
choice, and conservatives can use it to reduce government regulation or
public ownership (for more on the seeming contradictory application of
neoliberalism, see Brown [2006]).

Such social policies coincide with, and reflect, substantial changes in
the political economy of family lives in Japan. For much of the postwar
period, norms of marriage and family life suggested marital relationships
were both disconnected and fundamentally dependent. In these norms,
husbands were responsible for providing financially for their families
through full-time work that often required overtime, socializing away from
family members, and might include extra-marital sexual relations (Allison
1994, Ishii-Kuntz and Maryanski 2003). Women, in turn, were responsible
for household labor, child care, and though many took part-time jobs, the
idealized family structure situated their financial contributions as ancillary.

Walter Edwards (1990), an anthropologist doing research about Japanese
marriages in the 1980s, created an evocative phrase to describe this ideal:
complementary incompetence. With this phrase, Edwards was suggesting
that Japanese social structures at the time made it impossible for either
a man or woman to find success independently without a marital partner.

Edwards theorized that men needed wives because their work schedules
made it impossible to do any of the domestic labor needed to sustain real
life; and women needed husbands because social norms made it impos-
sible for them to get paid enough to live on their own. Men and women
were drawn together in marriage partially because social structures made
it impossible to accomplish things alone. In this older ideal of family life,
the typical disconnections—work from home, husbands’ social networks
from wives’, sexuality from marital relationships—simultaneously con-
nected spouses more tightly through the social and economic structures
of marriage. Further, women gained social and political power through
their identities as housewives and mothers, making some women less
willing to quickly jettison these roles in a search for the neoliberal values
of personal independence, power, or freedom (Alexy 2010, Allison 2000,
Borovoy 2001, Gordon 1997, LeBlanc 1999). The contemporary discus-
sion about how dependence should figure into marital relationships re-
flects these mainstream structures in which women have had authority
primarily as mothers—as people who are especially adept at teaching, managing, and allowing healthy dependence.

Although the divorce rate has been slowly rising for most of the post-war period, the current increase coincides with the burgeoning normativity of neoliberal ethics. If neoliberalism creates a preference for private control and ownership on a policy level, it privileges a similar independence for individuals. In such a perspective, selves are most successful when they are atomized, self-reliant, and responsible for their own needs (Harvey 2007, Gershon 2011). These kinds of policies can translate into fewer state-funded support systems but also, on the level of the family, to constructions of family relationships that are not premised on dependence. The neoliberal ethical system is a demand to privilege individualism and individual responsibility as the marks of a successful adult person. Rather than the ideal of “complementary incompetence” described by Edwards (1990), these neoliberal constructions of family life suggest that the strongest marriages link people who could otherwise function independently, a marital ethos I label “independently together.” As embodied in the tip that spouses should not use parental terms to refer to each other, contemporary martial advice suggests that marriages are stronger—and people are happier—when spouses are more responsible and less dependent.

This advice, and the neoliberal ethic it espouses, challenges not only typical naming patterns but also fundamental constructions of Japanese relationality that are based on ideal dependence (amae). In contrast to Western understandings of selfhood and relationality premised on “preservation and idealization of separation and individuation” (Bradshaw 1990:68), Doi (1978) theorized that Japanese maturity is structured on and through relations of dependence. Rather then being automatically immature or problematic, as they might be described from Western perspectives, relationships built on dependence “permeate” Japanese society and enable people to rely on each other (Doi 1978:65). Reflecting on the continued importance of rhetorics of productive dependence in the late 1990s, Borovoy suggests:

The notion that one need not “look out for oneself” but rather can achieve one’s ends by presuming on the good graces of others suggests the possibility of harmonious human relationships that do not entail a curtailment of self-interest. (Borovoy 2005:23)
For Borovoy’s informants, mostly wives struggling with their husbands’ alcoholism, social expectations of dependence between husbands and wives made it particularly difficult for the wives to enact the “tough love” demanded by American Alcoholics Anonymous methodology. In other contexts, happily married couples described dependence (amae) as an excuse, allowing husbands to avoid domestic responsibilities. Even if a wife would like a more helpful husband, she might excuse his lack of help because of his dependent personality (North 2009). Similarly, despite increasingly popular neoliberal rhetoric and marital advice that attempts to reduce dependence between spouses, women described to me both stifling demands and romantic possibilities stemming from dependence.

The Business of Divorce

Every counselor with whom I talked either agreed outright that it was a bad idea for spouses to call each other “mother” and “father,” or recognized why some people might find such naming practices problematic. The repetition of this tip, however, should not suggest uniformity in counseling situations or styles. In this section, I describe the multiplicity of counseling opportunities available at the time of my fieldwork. These opportunities are divided by cost (from free to hundreds of dollars per hour), location (online or in person), and type of facilitation (through employers or privately arranged).

Compared with experiences from the early 1990s and before, people struggling with marital problems in the early 2000s were increasingly likely to turn to what could be broadly defined as the counseling industry. Despite the certificate offered by a few national psychological associations, there were no national standards or requirements for professionals operating under the broad title “counselor” (Iwasaki 2005:130). Thus a divorcing person seeking professional or semi-professional advice faced a range of possible fees, formats, and therapeutic spaces. Despite this variety and lack of formal statistics, however, the counseling options now available represent a major change to previous ways of dealing with family problems. Echoing Rose and Miller’s (2008) theorization of demands for expert knowledge within neoliberalism, every person with whom I talked described counseling’s current availability and attractiveness to be a relatively new standard. Indeed, one of the regulars in a monthly group I attended said that she joined because there were no
such groups when she’d gotten divorced 14 years before. Despite being happily remarried, she found value in devoting one morning a month to a group discussion centered on human relationships, and she paid 6,000 yen (approximately US $60) to participate. When I asked people over 40 if they had ever sought the help of a professional counselor, many explained that counseling used to have its own stigma. They suggested that Japanese people often believed that only those who had major psychological problems would seek out such counseling. One working class mother of two adult children, who had divorced her husband ten years before after years of emotional and physical abuse, said that the stigma she felt being a divorced woman would have only been compounded by going to a counselor. Thus one of the most consistent findings of my research was that the vast majority of people now facing divorce understand counseling, in any form, to be a more acceptable and available option than it was in the early 1990s and before.

Marital and family counseling in Japan is available in formats in which privacy, cost, and personalizing all vary. Anyone with an internet connection (or internet-ready cell phone) can find multiple websites with generalized tips for solving common marital problems or negotiating divorces. Without too much searching, Takako Yamada’s website also appears, through which she offers free and personally-tailored advice to people seeking to improve their marriages. In a meeting at her home, Yamada, then in her late 20s, explained that her interest and skills in counseling stemmed from two very common sources: her own problems with her husband and advice from mainstream popular magazines. When Yamada and her husband were first married, she said they fell quickly into untenable patterns of behavior that cut harshly across gender lines: as an example, she explained that she would throw together some quick dinner and hand it wordlessly to her husband, who would scarf it down with no conversation or thanks. Mirroring tips that I heard many other counselors give, she suggested that this dynamic of silent (and possibly embittered) service and consumption is not good for any marriage. As she told me of her personal revelation and her attempts to help other people solve marital problems, her husband puttered around their kitchen making lunch for the extended family with their infant daughter on his hip—quite the image of the new-age involved father. By her own estimation, Yamada has communicated with almost 2,000 people via email, spending hours each day responding to messages with personalized advice. She has never
charged a fee and, before me, had never met anyone in person that had contacted her through her website.

In contrast, Yoko Sekiguchi’s regular appearance on television talk shows has made her name well known, and she has created a counseling center that offers a range of options for people seeking advice. In my conversations with her, Sekiguchi described how clients can pay over 30,000 yen (approximately US $300) for an hour of personal counseling with her, which she characterized as, “more expensive than a lawyer!” Freely admitting that she has no formal training in counseling, Sekiguchi’s “Family Center” has trained counselors on staff to help clients who may want more long-term therapy. In addition to the private advice sessions, Sekiguchi herself offers workshops about dealing with common problems surrounding divorce—splitting finances, agreeing on child custody, negotiating a divorce’s terms.

Counseling opportunities can also become available through a workplace. In a small office in the middle of Tokyo, two middle-aged women sat chatting between computers and telephones. They have both been marriage counselors for many years and now work for a telephone counseling service that derives most of its business from corporate clients. Large companies hire this firm to provide telephone counseling about a variety of issues, ranging from marital problems, to domestic violence, and school refusal. These counseling lines reflect not only changing family problems, but also corporate awareness of the risks of employee depression and sexual or power harassment claims, or employee depression (Okada 2005). Because a large percentage of the people who call in are living overseas (often relocated by their companies), the counselors explained that they regularly give advice about dealing with foreign countries and the stress that such a move can cause within families. Importantly, for these corporate clients, the callers themselves do not pay directly—the availability of the telephone number is a benefit of employment and the company is charged a flat rate. When the counselors described this as a relatively new system, becoming more popular in the last ten years, it seemed a major shift in the benefits some companies deem necessary to keep employees functioning and happy. Entertainment accounts were once used to keep (male) employees involved in the company’s business beyond working hours (Allison 1994), but now many multi-national companies understand marital and family counseling to be similarly necessary to enable good work.
I describe these vignettes of counseling options in contemporary Japan to suggest the range of counseling options and the burgeoning, and diverse, market for counselors. I found not only a growing opportunity for potential clients to find counselors, but also increased viability of careers organized around providing counseling. When I joined a training course run by a psychology center, the vast majority of participants described their interest in becoming counselors as the result of their own difficulties or those of their friends or relatives. To these ends, each of the 43 participants paid 5,000 yen (approximately US $50) for a two hour training session once a week. For the participants with whom I talked, in ways predicted by Rose and Miller (2008), counseling seems a newly viable career.

Terms of Endearment
Current Japanese literature on marital problems and risk emphasizes the dangerous identifications created by using parental kinship terms for spouses; however, previous ethnographic literature about families presented these behaviors as standard actions that demonstrated the relative importance paid to parent-child relationships. Describing village life in Suye in the mid-1930s, John Embree (1967) found it common for family members to be addressed using kinship terms from the youngest generation’s perspective. Thus a man living in a house with his son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren would be called “grandfather” (ojiisan) by everyone, not just his grandchildren (Embree 1967:86). Ella Wiswell described similar patterns of a daughter-in-law calling her mother-in-law “mother” (kaka-san) (Smith and Wiswell 1984:199). Unmarried couples used “you” (anata) to speak to each other, which Embree glossed as “thou” or “dear” (1967:86), which his wife later characterized as an “affectionate” term (Smith and Wiswell 1984:176). In both cases, the implication was that most married couples begin to call each other “mother” and “father” soon after marriage, possibly even before having children, and using “you” (anata) was an intimate gesture that embarrassed most people.

In her research almost 40 years later, Takie Sugiyama Lebra (1984) found that merely asking people how they addressed their spouses and family members embarrassed them. Based on ethnography conducted between 1976 and 1980, her results mirror what many of my informants, in 2005-2006, described as “normal” (fūtsu) practices in more traditional or conservative homes. More specifically, the behaviors Lebra describes
are precisely what some professional counselors and informants characterized as fundamentally problematic. We get no sense from Lebra that the practices were worrisome to any of her informants; their embarrassment seemingly stemmed from being asked to explain intimate terms (1984:127). Compared to the neutral (if shy) tone that Lebra’s informants’ used to describe being called “hey!” (oi!) or “mother,” my informants, 25 years later, used these same practices as evidence of the inherent problems of dependence and disrespect in Japanese marriages and the necessity of men changing their attitudes toward women. I illustrate this point using the examples of two women who articulated their dissatisfaction with these particular patterns of behavior.

Megumi-san was one of many people who went out of their way to make sure I knew Japanese men were likely to call their wives only with “hey!” Megumi-san was in her early 50s and occasionally participated in gatherings at the Family Center. Firmly working class, with three children, and living separately from her husband, she simply did not have the money to participate more regularly in therapy groups. During a day of hanging out—eating lunch, window shopping, and sharing fruity desserts—our conversation ranged over a number of topics. In the midst of talking about the general state of marriages in Japan, she looked up and said, “You know about ‘food, bath, sleep (meshi, furo, neru),’ right? How Japanese men talk to their wives?” She went on to tell a hypothetical story that many other people had also described: When a husband comes home, he’ll first request food from his wife by saying only, “food!” (meshi) before demanding a “bath!” (furo) and “sleep!” (neru) in similarly abrupt language. In the same train of thought, Megumi-san, like many other people, continued by mentioning that these same men are likely not to refer to their wives as anything at all—“They just say ‘hey!’ (oi).” As she told me these scenarios, Megumi-san did what other people had done when they mentioned them to me: she gestured toward my notebook and suggested that I “write this down” because it was a key to understanding Japanese marriages and marital problems. These examples mirror more general understandings about why and how divorce happens by placing the onus on men. But, further, Megumi-san’s insistent scenarios simultaneously suggest that she believes key evidence of marital difficulties can be found in the words a husband speaks, or doesn’t speak, to his wife. The hypothetical husband’s words for his wife—hey!—and his words at her—food, bath, sleep!—have become key symbols of the quality of marriage and a common shorthand
for structural problems faced in contemporary relationships. For Megumi-san and women like her, neoliberal ethics of individuality were attractive because they seemed to undercut such demanding dependences.

Osada-san, a woman in her 40s I’d first met at a training course for people who want to become counselors, used her ex-husband’s attempts to call her “mother” to characterize how their marriage had been problematic, if not doomed, from the beginning. After they both graduated from prestigious private universities in Japan, she and her husband met while working in Hong Kong. At the time, she was 32, hadn’t dated anyone, but wanted to get married. Her husband was five years younger and they dated briefly before he proposed. She said that he proposed as a reaction to a letter she wrote saying that she didn’t want to continue the relationship if he wasn’t thinking about marriage. In conversation with me, at a cheap chain restaurant crowded with high school students, Osada-san described his proposal in a fancy Ginza restaurant, and the changes that occurred once she became a wife. After quitting her job, she went with her husband to live in the United States for a year while he completed a business degree. It was a very stressful time for her and, although they were trying to have children, she found that she was unable to get pregnant “because of the stress.”

This talk of having children prompted Osada-san’s first representation of what was wrong with her husband and their marriage. Although she and I both knew that the story would end in her divorce, her narrative up to that point had been neutral, if not slightly romantic. It was a relatively happy story of a couple meeting, getting married, and starting a life together. But as she told me about her husband’s willingness to step into the role of her “baby,” Osada-san characterized his desire to be dependent as repulsive. While also describing their marriage as ultimately untenable, she felt it was typical for many husbands in Japan.

Allison: Did you want kids?
Osada-san: I wanted kids.
Allison: Did your husband?
Osada-san: Yes, he did… But he said that until we have children he said, “I can be your baby.” I don’t want such a big baby, I thought. A dependent child… There are lots of Japanese men who think like this, you know? Men who want
The typed transcript and English gloss fail to capture Osada-san’s poisonous tone as she yelled the final phrase of reported speech at me. Over the steady chatter of high schoolers talking, her breathy voice became guttural as she almost growled her response—or what she had wanted to say—when her husband offered to become her baby: *I am not your mommy!* Describing it to me almost ten years after her divorce, she understood her husband’s misidentification of her as his mother to be the first sign of trouble in their marriage. Although this naming practice was once very normal, Osada-san articulated an opinion increasingly typical in the contemporary moment: the expectations inherent in a husband calling his wife “mother” suggest untenable degrees of dependence.

Osada-san is now enrolled in evening classes to become a therapeutic counselor, but she did not talk with a professional counselor when she was thinking about divorce. Instead of reflecting on the ideas of any number of contemporary counselors who use this pattern of identification to index divorce risk, Osada-san described her reaction against her husband calling her “mommy” as visceral and uncontrollable, as a reaction to something that felt gross and strange. Even if it would have been completely typical for her parents’ generation, she immediately felt that being called “mommy” by her husband was not a good sign for her marriage.

**Selfhood and Untenable Marriages**

The standard Japanese variations of teknonymy—referring to parents and eventually grandparents from the perspective of the oldest child or grandchild—are regularly marshaled as evidence of the particular organization of Japanese selfhood. In recent decades, literature on identity and selfhood has described Japanese organizations of “the self” to be more relational and contextual than North American or European understandings. Dorinne Kondo (1990), Jane Bachnik and Charles Quinn (1994), Nancy Rosenberger (2001), and others have suggested that Japanese people are less likely to believe they have some fundamental
core “self” and are, instead, more likely to feel that selfhood depends on context. Spatial binary pairs—inside/outside, front/back, horizontal/vertical—can be used to describe any relationship in terms that are always shifting and relative. Family members or friends who are part of the “inside” (uchi) group in one context can be “outsiders” in another and, researchers suggest, being able to negotiate these shifts is one mark of adulthood and maturity.

If shifting and contextual identities have been the hallmark of theories of Japanese identity and selfhood, contemporary marriage counselors suggest that selves that are too flexible can be dangerous to marriages or, perhaps more important, that people need a firm sense of themselves in order to be successfully married. Counselors aren’t the only ones with this idea—many of the people with whom I talked in the course of my fieldwork made obvious the relationship between selfhood and marriage. The vast majority of people who had been divorced or were thinking about it explained divorce by saying that they had lost their “consciousness of self” or “self-confidence” (jibun jishin), and this loss could, in turn, be used to describe and explain myriad other problems from domestic violence to infidelities. By far, one of the most common explanations I heard for divorce was that it was an attempt to regain a sense of self. Such an explanation was so common that, to give one example, when a 30-something year old divorced woman introduced herself and her marriage history in a support group organized around investigating relationships, she said, “When I was married, I didn’t have a self (jibun jishin ga nakatta).” Such explanations are far from unusual.

Midori-san was one such divorced woman who described her need for self-consciousness as a motivation for her divorce. Now in her late 50s, Midori-san divorced almost 15 years ago, leaving her husband when their son was in high school and their daughter in junior high. Like other counseling group members, her desire to regain her quintessential “self-ness” (jibunrashiisa) was important in her decision to divorce, because she felt she couldn’t be herself or have self-confidence within the marriage.

Although her life since her divorce has become something of a quest for self-awareness—organized around such regular participation in counseling sessions that she has taken a leadership role in her therapy group—Midori-san’s divorce also enabled her to leave a husband who had been physically abusing her for years. When she was asked to describe why she got divorced, Midori-san was much more likely to
discuss her attempts to find her true self and self-confidence, though explanations for divorce because of domestic violence have been acceptable for longer. When Midori-san got divorced in the early 1990s, common attitudes still criticized divorced men and women (though primarily women) for failing to fix the marriage, or for giving up too soon. Numerous informants described domestic violence as one of the only acceptable explanations for divorce during this time period; one son of a divorced woman said his mother was stigmatized because her bruises were literally not visible enough and therefore neighbors couldn’t understand why she was leaving her marriage. Although Midori-san had lived through a very violent marriage, her current descriptions and explanation for divorce diminish the violence and emphasize her quest for selfhood. I can certainly imagine why Midori-san would not want to relive the painful memories of abuse. But because she is open about her experience and regularly contributes in group counseling sessions, I am convinced that she describes her divorce as a search for self rather than a flight from abuse not only because the former is easier to discuss. Contrary to patterns seen as recently as 15 years ago, when was she divorcing, such a quest for self has become a more common, and commonly intelligible, explanation for why people leave their marriages. Midori-san’s multifaceted explanation is both completely true and utterly reflective of the changing importance of independence and a firm sense of self in contemporary Japan. As discussed by Gershon and Lepselter elsewhere in this special collection, neoliberalism demands particular forms of self and self-reflexivity, both of which are key to Midori-san’s current representations of her divorce.

**The Attractiveness of Dependence**

Although much of the professional marital advice suggests that people, especially women, should be unhappy when their spouses use parental terms for them because it reflects and creates a dependent child-like relationship, having a romantic partner become dependent is not always considered unattractive by people in relationships. I now turn to a discussion of the attractiveness of dependence, with an example of Etsuko, a 37-year-old woman and Yano-san, her boyfriend, which describes the complicated shifting attractiveness of romance with someone who likes to be indulged to the point of dependence.
Intimate Dependence and its Risks in Neoliberal Japan

Etsuko and Yano-san met online, through the community website “mixi,” and began emailing, then talking on the phone, and finally meeting for dinner. Despite owning his own successful design firm, in his interactions with Etsuko, Yano-san seemed unwilling to do much for himself. He never cooked or cleaned up afterward. Once when I visited their home, I saw him open the refrigerator while holding a bottle of wine, look confused, and then yell “Etsuko, fix the wine!” and put the bottle down on the counter. As their relationship progressed, Yano-san liked to know where Etsuko was at most times, and began calling her if he wasn’t sure what she was doing. She told me with frustration of one instance where he called 20 times during the span of a few hours while she was in a conference meeting. That seemed to annoy her, but their relationship continued.

Once, while Etsuko and I sat chatting, she came up with a new game: determining the “real” ages of all the people we knew, regardless of their biological age. First, she pronounced that the dumber of her two cats was still two-years-old, the other cat as six, and then that she and I both probably about 17. Yano-san, she thought, was about four-years-old, and then the game continued with us deciding the ages for all our mutual friends and their spouses. Since that time, whenever Yano-san did something remotely mature, Etsuko made a crack about how he was possibly nearing a birthday. But when he did what he was prone to, and called her 15 times in an hour because she wasn’t answering, he got pushed down a year. What interests me so much about this joke is that it didn’t make her want to stop dating him. She was completely aware that he could act as a selfish child—and actually noticed that fact so much that she made ongoing jokes about it—but that didn’t diminish her commitment at all.

For Etsuko, one story in particular epitomized exactly what she wanted in a man, and how dependence could be attractive. One day, Taiji, a friend of Etsuko, arrived at her house with four pieces of different cake to share. After presenting the gift, Taiji asked Etsuko, “Which type would you like?” Etsuko countered that any of the pieces were fine with her, and that she would choose after Taiji did. He demurred, again, saying that she should pick the one she wanted first. When she told me this story later, she said that this exchange was already enough to annoy her. “But then it continued!” she told me incredulously. Even after Etsuko had picked the piece she most wanted, and then offered the
box again to Taiji, he refused again, this time saying, “Well, which piece do you want to eat tomorrow?” As Etsuko told me this story, the morning after the interaction, she literally screamed in frustration and yelled “that’s enough! (mo-ii)” while making chopping motions in the air. She was mad. She was mad that Taiji was so intent on being nice and unselfish that he had become annoying.

Lucky for her and this story-telling, Etsuko had a relationship with what might be considered Taiji’s diametric opposite, at least in terms of dependence: Yano-san. After Taiji went home, Yano-san came over to the house. There were two pieces of cake left in the box that Taiji had brought and Etsuko gestured toward them and suggested they could eat cake. She went into the kitchen to put on water for tea and, by the time she came back, Yano-san had already eaten half of the piece of cake that he picked. There was no asking what piece she wanted, no asking what piece she might want tomorrow. Yano-san knew what he wanted, took it, and started eating. And Etsuko loved this. This, she told me, was how men should be. Sure, it might be annoying when Yano-san called her ten times an hour when he couldn’t get a hold of her, but she would take his expectations for indulgence and borderline dependence any day, especially over Taiji’s infernal willingness to be flexible or to anticipate her needs. Selfishness, and the dependence that comes with it, was much more attractive to her.

Etsuko was far from the only woman who described the romantic potential possible within dependence. Midori-san, the woman who divorced her abusive husband a decade before I met her, surprised me by asking to be introduced to any available men I knew. She had been alone for long enough, she said, and was looking for someone with whom to share a partnership. Using a metaphor of a bicycle built for two riders, and invoking classic images from ideals of companionate love, she described wanting a man with whom she could share daily struggles and “peddle together.” She didn’t mind if this hypothetical man leaned on her because she planned to lean on him, since that is what love is about. For these women, dependence is a key ingredient of romantic love even when, and precisely because, they contemplate the emphasis on individualized selfhood suggested by neoliberalism.
Conclusions

Although Etsuko’s patience with and attraction to dependence mirrored patterns more typically associated with older generations, her ambiguity toward Yano-san’s behavior represents a common tension for many Japanese people in intimate relationships. On the one hand, women voice frustration with norms of amae that make their husbands feel comfortable calling them “mother” and expecting maternal attention. On the other hand, though, as many women told me, “It’s nice to be needed,” and having dependent intimates feels like companionate romance. Although such tensions between unhealthy dependence and a satisfying interdependence might happen in any cultural context, the normative expectations of amae and the links between dependence and intimacy make it particularly salient for many Japanese people.

Within this context, the simple tip that spouses should alter their denotational practices to strengthen marriages represents the complex negotiation of neoliberal ethics, cultural norms, and personal desires. Coming as it does within clusters of other tips articulated by newly professional marriage “experts,” this piece of advice finds traction against individuals’ attempts to discover and enact the intimate relationships that will make them most happy. For some women, situational happiness came as they shared with me their husbands’ outrageous dependence, listing in great detail the shocking everyday chores that could not be accomplished without them. Even if a woman did not enjoy the activities of making her husband’s every meal or packing his suitcases whenever he traveled, there seemed to be some limited pleasure in the retelling, at least in the conversational competitions between women talking about their dependent husbands.⁵

In an even more straightforward way, other women, like Etsuko, continue to have complicated relationships with the idea of intimate dependence. Rather than embodying an impossible neoliberal ideal that only people who don’t need other people should form relationships, many women find dependence to be a space of real romantic possibility. Loving someone is about allowing them to relax into dependence, and companionate ideals in and beyond Japan suggest that spouses who need each other are those who are most likely to be happy. In contrast, neoliberal ethics of disconnection and independence give Japanese women the vocabulary to articulate their dissatisfaction with particular relationships, but few people find pleasure or happiness embodying such ideals. In
the current moment, many Japanese women contemplating intimate relationships find that neoliberal ideals are more pleasurable to articulate than to embody.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Ilana Gershon, Katrina Moore, Karl Jakob Krogness, Akiko Takeyama, and everyone who generously allowed me to conduct research with them. The research on which this article was based was funded by the Fulbright IIE and the Japan Foundation. This article was greatly improved by the comments of three reviewers.

ENDNOTES

1 My thanks to an anonymous reader for this point.


3 All names of people and organizations have been made pseudonymous.

4 More generally, this tip is often articulated as “spouses should use polite words (aisatsu) with each other,” meaning: “please,” “thank you,” “good morning,” “welcome home,” etc. This idea was also mentioned in the vignette with which I began this article.

5 Such talk about possible divorces remains very different than actual divorces and, in other publications, I delineate between the attractiveness of imagined or fantasy divorces and the often brutal difficulties inherent in the actual ones (Alexy 2007:184).

REFERENCES


Intimate Dependence and its Risks in Neoliberal Japan


